VIEW FROM THE MOUNTAIN
Exodus 32:15-24, Luke 9:28-36
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Just north west of the city in which I spent my youth there is a dramatic ridge in the Allegheny mountains. The grade is quite steep and actually begins inside the city limits. Civil engineers still shake their heads over the nineteenth century technical ingenuity which took the railroad up over those mountains around what railroad buffs know as the Horseshoe Curve. The ridge is the reason the city is there - built to service the railroad at its most critical point in the East. If you have the nerve for it you can drive up one of the mountains north of town and arrive at a plateau on top, and if you are still inclined proceed out to the very edge where the mountain juts out into the valley below. People take that drive for two reasons. Young people go there on warm summer evenings when the moon is full for obvious reasons Other people go there in the early evening when the sun is beginning to disappear over the mountain and the long shadows of the ridge extend half way across the city below. People who live in town must go up that mountain once a year or so, as I still do when I return, and I now know why. Because what you see from the mountain is entirely different from what you see in the streets of the city. It was not a pretty town: it's changed now, but it used to be a small, heavily industrial city, with narrow streets, and rows of gray frame houses, interrupted occasionally by what is known locally as "box car red", and through the middle of which runs what was then the largest railroad freight yard in the world; alive with steam locomotives. It was dirty and noisy and not very pretty.

But from that mountain it looked beautiful, nestled in the dramatic valley, ringed by mountain reservoirs, neat, quiet, clean. I know now that it was important to go up there because there was a dimension of the truth about the city available up there but no where else; a dimension necessary to comprehend the whole, the reality, the essence of the city. It was always a surprise to see it from the mountain. It was always good.

The significance of mountains for the human spirit is as old as the race itself. From antiquity people have gone to the mountain to get away from what was happening in the valley; for refreshment and renewal, and ultimately to encounter God. Perhaps it was the proximity to the heavens: more probably, I like to think, it was because of the new perspective, the fuller truth, that the mountain always provides. Whatever the primal reason, Moses meets God on Mt Sinai and mountains continue to be the place where deity and humanity meet throughout the Bible - Horeb, Hermon, the Mt. of Olives, a hill called Calvary. In his last speech Martin Luther King said that he'd been to the mountain and everybody knew what he meant.

The dynamic of being on the mountain top was expressed beautifully by Eunice Tietjens in a poem...

"But I shall go down from this airy space,
this swift, white peace, this stinging exultation,
And time will close about me
and my soul stir to the rhythm of the daily round.
Yet having known, life will not press so close,
and always I shall feel time ravel thin about me.
For once I stood
In the white windy presence of eternity."

(Profiles from China, in
The Interpreter's Bible,
vol. 7, p.776).

The view from the mountain, really or metaphorically, reveals the truth in a way not available elsewhere. It is necessary, therefore, to go to the mountain, and from the vantage point of height and distance to see the whole picture.

And yet, the truth from the mountain is so big and so beautiful and so inspiring that there is a sense in which it becomes a tempting distortion. By commanding a view of the whole it actually blurs the details and the particulars. It is tempting, but basically false to define a city slum with the view one enjoys from several thousand feet. The view from the mountain of my youth did not alter the rest of the truth which was basic human truth, which is to say railroad soot and unemployment and crime, divorce and alcoholism. You can't see that from the mountain at all. In fact, if you could stay up on the mountain you might never know any of it existed.

Thus two texts about important mountain top experiences, and the long journey back down into the valley.

No one ever had more of a comedown than Moses. For forty days and nights he was on the mountain top with God. At the end of that period he had the law, the structure that would transform the wandering tribes of recently escaped slaves, into a nation. There is no more important moment in the Old Testament than when Moses starts to walk down from Mt Sinai. But in the valley, where the people are camped a bizarre scenario is evolving. The people have become restless in Moses' absence. Aaron, second in command, has constructed a small calf out of gold, the deity of the people in the midst of whom they were now camped, and they have thrown quite a party. Delicately, the text reads - "the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." (Exodus 32:6).

On his way down the mountain, beside himself I imagine, with the fact that he has in his hands a direct word from the Lord, Moses hears the sounds of a celebration. At first he thinks they're singing a victory song, a hymn, maybe. And then the awful truth becomes clear. God's people, the beloved, blessed heirs of God's law, at the highest, holiest moment in their history, are in a drunken stupor. That's quite a comedown from the view from the mountain.

The New Testament text tells a similar story. The event it describes is known as the Transfiguration and Biblical scholars agree that it is one of the most important occasions in the Gospel narrative. Quite intentionally Jesus took the inner circle of disciples, his closest friends, Peter, James and John up onto a mountain. What happened next is a bit mystifying. The text indicates that His appearance changed. The point, I have always felt, is that they saw Him differently. It is not unusual, after all, to deal with a particular person on a daily basis, and then one day that person does or says something that causes you to see and understand him in an entirely new way. That's what transfiguration means, I believe. Clearly, the disciples of Jesus were not sure about who He was until after the resurrection. That's why they're interesting and human and important: they followed their instincts without concrete proof. In any event, sometimes they could see more clearly than others. Sometimes they knew He was something more than a carpenter-rabbi from Nazareth. Whatever happened up on that mountain, for a moment at least, His closest friends saw a new truth about Him. They would become confused again later but now, in that moment they knew

Peter's response is totally and predictably human. "It is well that we are here: let us make three booths..." How familiar that sounds! Peter didn't want to come down from his spiritual high. He wanted to memorialize the moment of truth: capture it, pin it down permanently in a shrine to which he could return when the truth became opaque once again. How understandably human this impetus to institutionalize the truth; to make a monument to this view from the mountain.

Jesus doesn't even acknowledge Peter's request. In fact, Luke is so embarrassed by Peter's faux pas that he apologizes by suggesting that Peter really didn't know what he was saying.

The sequence ends significantly with them coming down from the mountain and encountering the ever-present clamoring crowd, and a desperate father who had brought an epileptic son to Jesus. A man so touchingly desperate that he almost insists on our Lord's attention. "I begged your disciples to cast it out and they could not!" What a comedown - from the "white, windy presence of eternity" - to the desperate pleas of a father: from the certainty of divine truth to the blunt reality of a little boy in the throes of an epileptic seizure: from the quiet serenity of the mountain to the noisy human pain of the valley.

Truth, life and religion are all served well by a view from the mountain. Without the mountain we might never see the whole picture, the whole and fragile truth. But in each, it is the coming back down that matters.

That, I would submit, is a very important dynamic. Our instincts are to stay on the mountain, to preserve our high moments and avoid the blunt reality of the valley as long as possible. Our culture complies by providing a stream of escapist opportunities, all carefully designed to convey the new gospel: life can be lived on the mountain. The Playboy philosophy will one day, I am convinced, be regarded as one of the formative ideologies in the mid-twentieth century. It is, essentially, life - twenty-four hours a day, on the mountain top of pleasure.

The trouble is that not many people actually live that life, except in fantasy. Romance, for instance, may be greatly enhanced by an occasional quiet, intimate dinner for two with a special bottle of wine to be shared. But the relationship will stand or fall at a much more mundane level than that. Everybody needs a bit of romance. Intellignet people will plan for it to be part of their relationship. The reality of marriage, however, has more to do with diapers, colic, little league, dusting the furniture, doing the dishes, and paying the bills on time. Anybody can be happily married during a candlelight dinner. If you can pull it off hanging wallpaper together, it has been said, your love is real. The instinct for romance is good. But learning to communicate, to love and care for one another, in tenderness and compassion is imperative and difficult - when things aren't very romantic, when you're tired and it's been a long day or you're bored and irritated. That's the valley. That's where a lot of life is lived.

The instinct for the mountain top is expressed by the church as well. Langdon Gilkey, University of Chicago theologian, in his book Naming the Whirlwind draws an analogy with medieval German towns constructed at the foot of a castle. The castle was built to institutionalize a certain social structure. The town was governed from there. All important commerce and legal transactions happened there. But today all the functions which used to occur within its walls happen elsewhere. The only people who go there are tourists and the only commerce is in post cards. Not a few voices have suggested that the church is caught in the same dilemma. City churches particularly built to institutionalize their strength and prominence in a certain moment of time, stand empty all over the country today. And those that are not empty are hanging on for dear life to an age and mentality and urban situation long gone. The church in the city, a subject of some immediacy and urgency here, must guard always against the temptation to withdraw to its mountain top of ornate architecture, gorgeous music, quality education, and magnificent past, ever higher and higher from the valley of human need all around it. Jesus brought His disciples down from the heights to the blunt reality of a sick little boy. So this, or any like congregation, must see

itself, its identity and its future no longer in terms of what used to be but in terms of coming down from the high and holy moment of its worship life, for instance, to the urgent human need immediately outside. While the disciples were enjoying their moment of revelation, a sick little boy was waiting to be healed. And last Sunday, as we sat in this sanctuary, a man was shot directly across the street. If we are to be the church of Jesus Christ in this place, we must see our responsibilities in terms of both of those events.

But the mountain is so fresh and the air clear - and it's quiet there. What we want from the church and our religion, frankly, is a little clarity, a bit of revelation, and a respite from the noisy, busy valley in which we do our living. And at this point the strong inclination to stay on the mountain becomes very subtle and very powerful. Religi that is oriented toward mountain top experiences of salvation, certainty in matters of doctrine, absolute clarity in matters of ethics - is popular religion today. The noisier it is in the valley, the better the mountain looks. And a religion which can keep you up there looks very good indeed. Commenting on one of the more prominent sect groups within the church Gavin Reid writes: "They have created an almost totally absorbing mini-world for its adherents. They have spawned their own breed of books. They seem to have engendered a considerable number of conferences, conventions, special services and small group meetings. They have their own magazines, their own personalities, their own approved four star churches to which many will travel long distances on Sundays." (A New Happiness, p.43). In effect, a lot of religion designs itself for life on the mountain top and avoids all contact with the ambiguity of the life lived in the valley.

Sometimes we Presbyterians wish we could spend a little more time on the mountain. Sometimes we wonder why we have to be the experts in ambiguity: the ones always running around in the conflicts and controversies in the valley. Sometimes we wonder why we have to be the ones busy boycotting, picketing, protesting and pronouncing while others seem to be enjoying the cool, serene and clear air of their ecclesiastical mountain. Sometimes we feel inadequate when brother and sister Christians are so sure of what they believe and what is right and wrong and when, exactly, the moment of salvation happened. My guess is that most Presbyterians wonder what it would be like to be on the mountain top of religious faith.

And I think you and I need to hear very clearly the Word of God in the story of the Transfiguration. The religious experience of Peter, James and John did not begin on the mountain. I think it very significant that not one of the disciples of Jesus had a shattering, emotional salvation experience. Rather, they followed Him tentatively at first; they did not understand Him fully, they did not have all the answers. And after they had been following Him, He took them up in the mountain for a very brief experience of confirmation, certainty and revelation. It didn't last long. Before they knew it they were back down in the valley where life is lived. When Peter suggested that the mountain top experience should be the norm, Jesus didn't even respond. Or rather, His response was to push Peter back into life - into a poignant situation of human pain. "There," He seems to be saying, "in the illness of the boy, the exquisite pain of his father, the clamoring of the crowd; there is where religion must be and there, in my name, is where I want you to be."

Frederick Buechner writes: "Who is this who asks us to follow? We want to know who he is before we follow him - and that is understandable enough except that the truth of the matter is that it is only by first following him that we can begin to find out who he is." (The Magnificent Defeat, p.98).

You and I have been called to follow Jesus Christ - in the valley of our own lives. For most of us, most of the time, the setting is not going to be very spectacular. It is going to look suspiciously like a familiar office, living room, dinner table and committee meeting, examination room, conference table, courtroom. But that is where He wants us to be. That is where we live and love and sometimes laugh and sometimes cry. That is where all the beauty and ambiguity and poignancy and ecstacy of our lives is played out. That is where Jesus Christ calls us to follow Him and that is where we can count on Him to be.

And then one day, I am convinced, we will be taken to some mountain, perhaps only for a moment. But it will be enough and we will know, a rich, clear moment of truth..."this swift, white peace, this stinging exultation" - and then back down again, into the valley where life is lived and where Jesus Christ precedes us.

Amen.

We are grateful, Father, for moments of clear truth: for times of beauty and revelation and inspiration. We are grateful for the sense of Your presence and Your love which we are given on occasions. But grant us, Father, the faith to follow in the between times. Give us grace to follow in the valley - through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.